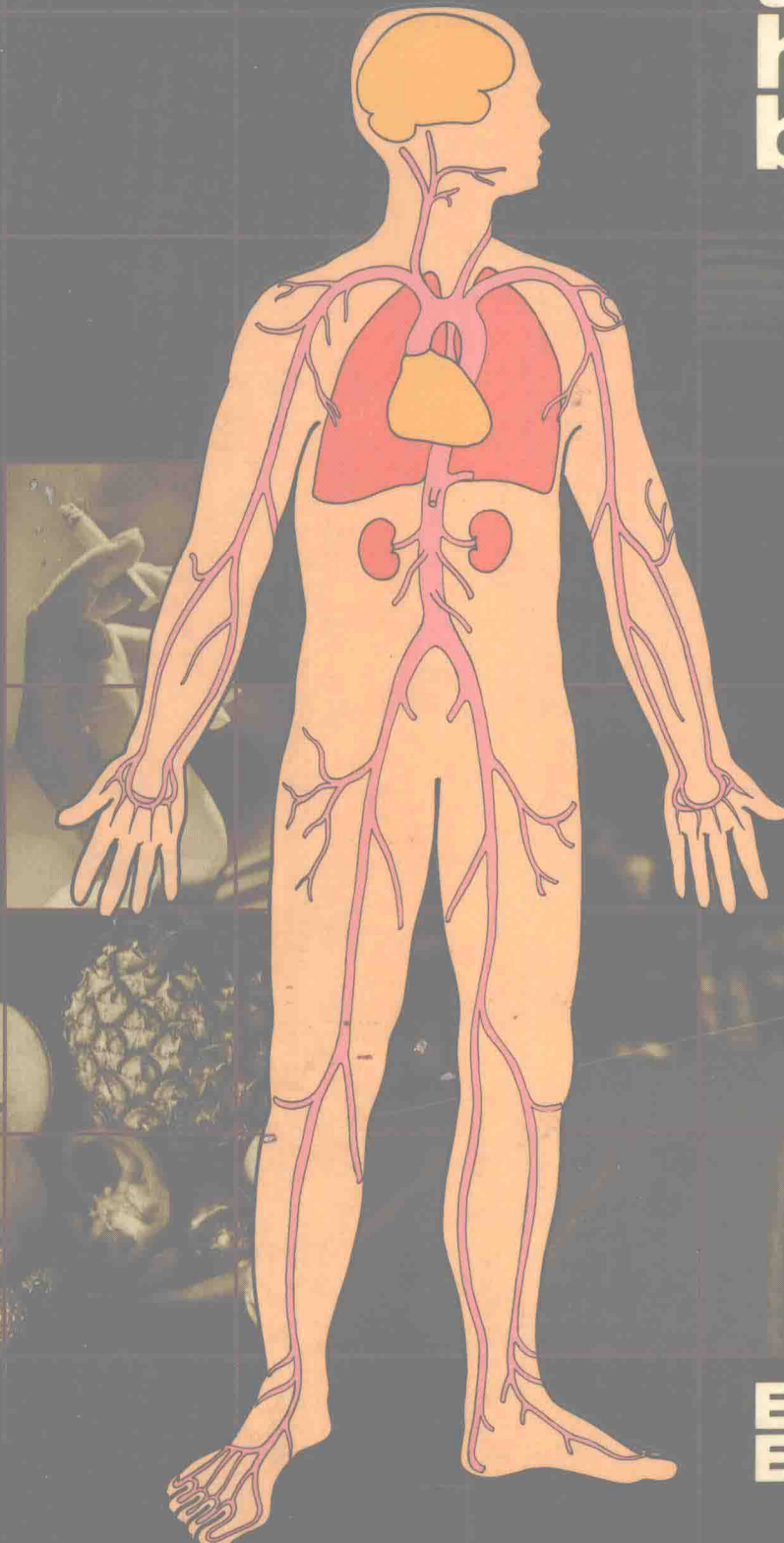


Understanding the human body



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Understanding the human body

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Contents

1 The living world and how we view it **1**

Characteristics of living things 2 Classifying the living world 9 Humans and their place in the animal kingdom 11
Human control of the environment 12

2 Cells, tissues and organs **15**

Importance of cells 16 Cells and their parts 16 How plant cells differ from animal cells 21 How molecules enter and leave cells 23 Structure and function of specialised cells 26
Levels of organisation 28

3 The chemicals of life **37**

Organisms contain chemicals 38 Role of carbohydrates, fats and proteins 43 Enzymes 45 Vitamins and minerals 48

4 The chemical network in living organisms **51**

Energy and action 52 Energy release 52 How energy is transferred 54 Glucose—the centre of the network 57 The chemical network in humans 60 Cellular respiration without oxygen 62 Sources of energy 63 Energy requirements of the human body 64

5 DNA—the key to life **67**

Growth and development of the young organism 68
Cell division 68 Importance of the nucleus 69 The chemical mystery of the nucleus 72 How DNA codes for cellular proteins 73 DNA, proteins and people 79
DNA switches 83

6 The circulatory system—lifeline of the cells	85
The need for a circulatory system 86 Building a transport system 88 The heart—a very special pump 90 Distributing the blood 94 The pulse and blood pressure 100 Control of the heart rate 102 Atherosclerosis 103 Blood—the carrier for the transport system 105 Platelets and blood clotting 112	
7 Defending the body against disease	113
Causes of disease 114 Defence barriers on the body surface 118 Lines of defence inside the body 122 Immune memory and vaccination 138 Rejection of foreign grafts 141 ‘Self’ and ‘non-self’ 142 Blood groups and transfusions 143 The Rh factor 146	
8 The lungs—a two-way diffusion unit	149
The problem of gas exchange 150 Gaseous exchange and lung structure 150 Diffusion in the alveoli 154 Conveying air to the lungs 155 Supplying fresh air to the alveoli 158 Control of ventilation rate 162 The larynx and vocal cords 165 Keeping the lungs clean 165	
9 Tobacco—more than a health hazard	169
The effects of nicotine 170 Smoking and heart disease 172 Smoking and cancer 173 Other substances in tobacco smoke 177 Further ill effects of tobacco smoke 179	
10 The digestive system—a food refinery	181
Terms and processes 184 Structure of the gut tube 185 Movement in the alimentary canal 187 Chemical breakdown of food 188 Organs of the alimentary canal 193 Absorption of the refined food 197 The liver—dispatch centre for the refinery 200 Balancing the fuels 202 Nutritional value of foods 206	

11 Teeth and a healthy mouth 213

Types of teeth 214 Structure of the tooth 216 Dental caries 218 Periodontal disease 220 Prevention of tooth decay 222 Strengthening the enamel barrier 226 Treatment of caries 228 Missing teeth—how to fill the gap 230

12 The kidney—a living filter and regulator 233

The problem of urea removal 235 Visible structures of the urinary system 236 Structure of the filtration unit 236 How the nephron functions 239 The kidney as a regulator 243 The bladder 244 Other forms of excretion 245

13 Nerves and hormones—agents of communication 247

The need for communication systems 248 Arrangement of the nervous system 250 Peripheral nerves 252 What is a nerve impulse? 254 Bridging the gap 255 The central nervous system 257 The reflex arc 260 More about the brain 262 Introducing the endocrine system 266 Control of blood sugar concentration 267 Other endocrine glands 270 The pituitary—the ‘master’ hormone gland 272

14 Drugs—foreign chemicals in the body’s systems 275

What is a drug? 276 Different types of drugs 276 How drugs are taken 277 What happens to a drug after administration 281 Factors affecting the way drugs act 283 Weighing up the risks 284 Drug use during pregnancy 286 Analgesics 287 Mood-altering drugs 291 The alternative to drugs 304

15 The sense organs—a link with the outside world 307

Receptor cells 308 The eye 311 The ear 318 The balance organs 323 Taste and smell 325 Deep receptors 327 Skin receptors 327

16 Alcohol—stimulant or depressant? 329

Alcohol—a by-product of energy release 330 Fermentation and wine-making 331 Beer-making 332 Fortified wines and distillates 333 Strength of drinks 335 Alcohol in the body's chemical network 336 Immediate effects of alcohol 338 Long-term excessive consumption of alcohol 340 Significance of blood alcohol concentration 343 Alcohol and driving 344

17 Reproduction—perpetuation of life 349

The need for specialised structures 350 Primary sex organs 350 Secondary sex organs and the transport of sex cells 357 Transfer of sex cells from male to female 358 The uterus—a place for growth and development 360 Control mechanisms in gamete production 361 Other effects of testosterone and oestrogen 364 Fertilisation and early development 365 Growth of the embryo 366 Lactation 370 Birth control 371 Sexual diseases 376 Menopause—the completion of a role 378 Sexual feelings in personal relationships 379

18 Bones and muscles—a framework for movement 381

Organising the framework 383 Details of the skeleton 384 Structure of bones and cartilage 395 Where bones meet 397 Special joints 400 How muscles move joints 401 Mechanism of muscle contraction 402 Balance and the control of movement 406

19 Ageing—as old as you feel? 407

What is ageing? 408 Changes at the cellular level 408 Effects of age on body systems 411 Loneliness in the elderly 417 Accommodation of old people 419 Nursing the elderly and terminally ill 422

Chapter 1

The living world and how we view it

- Characteristics of living things
- Classifying the living world
- Humans and their place in the animal kingdom
- Human control of the environment

We don't need a great deal of imagination to appreciate that the earth is composed of an extremely large number and variety of things. A casual glance at our surroundings will reveal rocks, trees, buildings, mountains, flowers, animals, roads and so on. Each object has its own form, colour, texture and composition—the features by which we recognise it and give it a name.

Young children learn step by step to recognise objects and features of their environment and in turn to give them names. As this process of recognition develops, children learn subconsciously to place different objects in different groups. That is, the child learns to classify the objects in the world around him. Perhaps the first difference a child becomes aware of is that between 'mother' and 'not mother'. A little later, as the child becomes aware of more objects around him, he realises that some objects move, others are soft, warm or furry and some make characteristic noises. Other objects may be hard, immobile, shiny or cold. In this mental process the child is grappling with one of the most basic classifications of the world he lives in—he is making the distinction between living and non-living things.



Living or dead:
how do we know?

Characteristics of living things

Biology is the study of living things. The word biology comes from two Greek words—*bios*, meaning life, and *logos*, meaning a study. What, then, are the characteristics of living things?

It is almost impossible to define life itself. It is not so difficult, however, to describe what living things are. This is because all living things have certain common characteristics. Some of these may also be found in some non-living things. For example, cars can move, and crystals may grow. However, only living organisms share all these characteristics.

We can demonstrate all of these characteristics in some of the very simplest forms of living things—tiny plants and animals, some made of a single cell and visible only under a microscope. The same living processes are basic to all forms of life, however. Although they may not be as easy to demonstrate, life depends on these same processes in trees, seaweed, mice and human beings.

Feeding

Feeding is probably one of the most obvious characteristics of living things. We are well aware that all living organisms feed—so many of the animals we can see around us appear to spend much of their time in search of food. Under a microscope we can observe tiny one-celled animals feeding on particles from their environment. Plants, too, 'feed' on molecules in the soil and air around them.

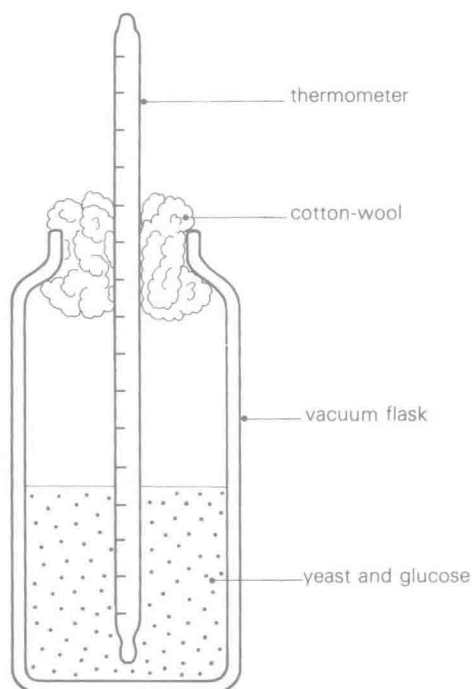


Fig 1.1 Apparatus used to demonstrate respiration

Living organisms use these 'food' molecules which they obtain from their environment to repair themselves and grow. They may also use them as a fuel, which they burn in chemical reactions, to release the energy they need for other life processes.

Respiration

Experiment Yeast cells, tiny one-celled plants, are placed in a vacuum flask, in a solution of 0.1 per cent glucose. A thermometer is placed in the yeast-glucose suspension, and the top of the flask is closed with cotton wool (Fig 1.1). The temperature of the suspension is recorded. A second temperature recording is made after 24 hours. The concentration of glucose after 24 hours is found to be zero. The temperature of the suspension has risen considerably.

Respiration—the release of energy

Explanation Yeast cells have used the glucose in a process called **respiration**. This is a chemical process which goes on inside all living organisms. It involves the chemical breakdown of glucose (sugar) to release energy. This chemical reaction can be summarised:



The energy is the most important part of this reaction. It is the energy that enables the yeast to carry on all its living functions:

- cell division (splitting) or reproduction
- building up its cellular structures (growth)
- breaking down unwanted structures and materials
- moving molecules into and out of the cell.

But why does the temperature increase in the vacuum flask? As the glucose is broken down, much of the energy in the glucose is trapped and used for the yeast's life processes. However, some of the energy escapes and is wasted. This waste energy becomes heat—hence the temperature increase.

During the breakdown of glucose in yeast cells, to release energy, two waste products are formed: ethyl alcohol (commonly referred to as alcohol) and a gas, carbon dioxide. Yeast cells break down sugar without using oxygen—this kind of respiration is called **anaerobic respiration**.

Most living organisms assist the breakdown of glucose by using oxygen. When oxygen is used, much more energy can be released. The process of breaking down glucose with oxygen is called **aerobic respiration**. Aerobic respiration is similar to anaerobic respiration in that glucose is broken down in order to release energy. However, instead of carbon dioxide and ethyl alcohol, the waste products of aerobic respiration are carbon dioxide and water. This reaction can be summarised as follows:



As in yeast cells, some of the energy resulting from this process is wasted as heat.

The human body is like a very complex machine. Huge amounts of energy must be provided all the time for the highly specialised life processes. Aerobic respiration provides most of the energy which the body cells need. However, sometimes oxygen cannot be supplied quickly enough to allow aerobic respiration to proceed. At these times, the cells must release energy from glucose without oxygen, that is by anaerobic respiration. This process is similar to anaerobic respiration in yeast cells. However, in all animals, the waste product of anaerobic respiration is lactic acid. The equation for anaerobic respiration in animal cells can be written:



Excretion

Experiment Some milk is placed in a test tube and an indicator used to test its acidity. The milk is slightly acidic. The milk is left for 5 days at room temperature, and its acidity is tested again. The acidity of the milk has increased considerably.

At the same time, another sample of milk is placed in the refrigerator. The acidity of this milk also is tested at the beginning and the end of the 5-day period. The acidity of this milk has not increased.

Explanation Bacteria in the milk sample kept at room temperature have used up sugars in the milk to release energy. The waste product of this process is lactic acid.

As explained in the previous section, this process is known as anaerobic respiration. The bacteria have no use for the lactic acid. In fact, if it collects inside the cells in high concentrations it becomes poisonous or toxic. To overcome this, lactic acid is eliminated or excreted by the bacteria. Lactic acid is thus called an excretory product.

(In the milk kept in the refrigerator, very little lactic acid is produced. This is because bacteria are unable to continue energy-releasing reactions when the temperature is low.)

All living organisms excrete some kind of waste material. In humans, the waste product resulting from the breakdown of proteins is very toxic. It is converted into urea (Chapters 4 and 12), which is excreted through the kidneys. Carbon dioxide, the waste product of aerobic respiration, is excreted through the lungs (see Chapter 8).

Movement

Watch a number of small aquatic organisms moving under a microscope, for example paramecium, amoeba and euglena (Fig 1.2). Each of these organisms moves by a different method. Although our bodies, as a whole, are moved by more complex systems (discussed in Chapter 18), each of these simple types of movements is important in particular cells in our bodies.

Paramecium moves by means of rows of small hairs which are attached to its surface. These are called **cilia**. As the cilia beat, they propel the microscopic animal forwards or backwards. Cilia are also found in the gullet of the paramecium. Here, their beating action wafts tiny food particles into this small hollow, ready for 'swallowing' by the animal. (We shall see later that cilia have an important job moving different particles on several of our body surfaces, too.)

Amoebae move by quite a different process. You can think of an amoeba as being like a loose jelly (cytoplasm) inside a thin plastic bag (cell membrane). The jelly flows around inside the plastic bag, and occasionally pushes slightly harder in a particular direction. When it does this it forms a projection or **pseudopod** (false foot). The rest of the cytoplasm (jelly) may flow in the same direction, so that the whole amoeba is brought to a new position (Fig 1.2b). Because it was first described in the amoeba, this type of movement is known as **amoeboid movement**. In our bodies, certain types of white blood cells move through the tissues by this means (see Chapter 7).

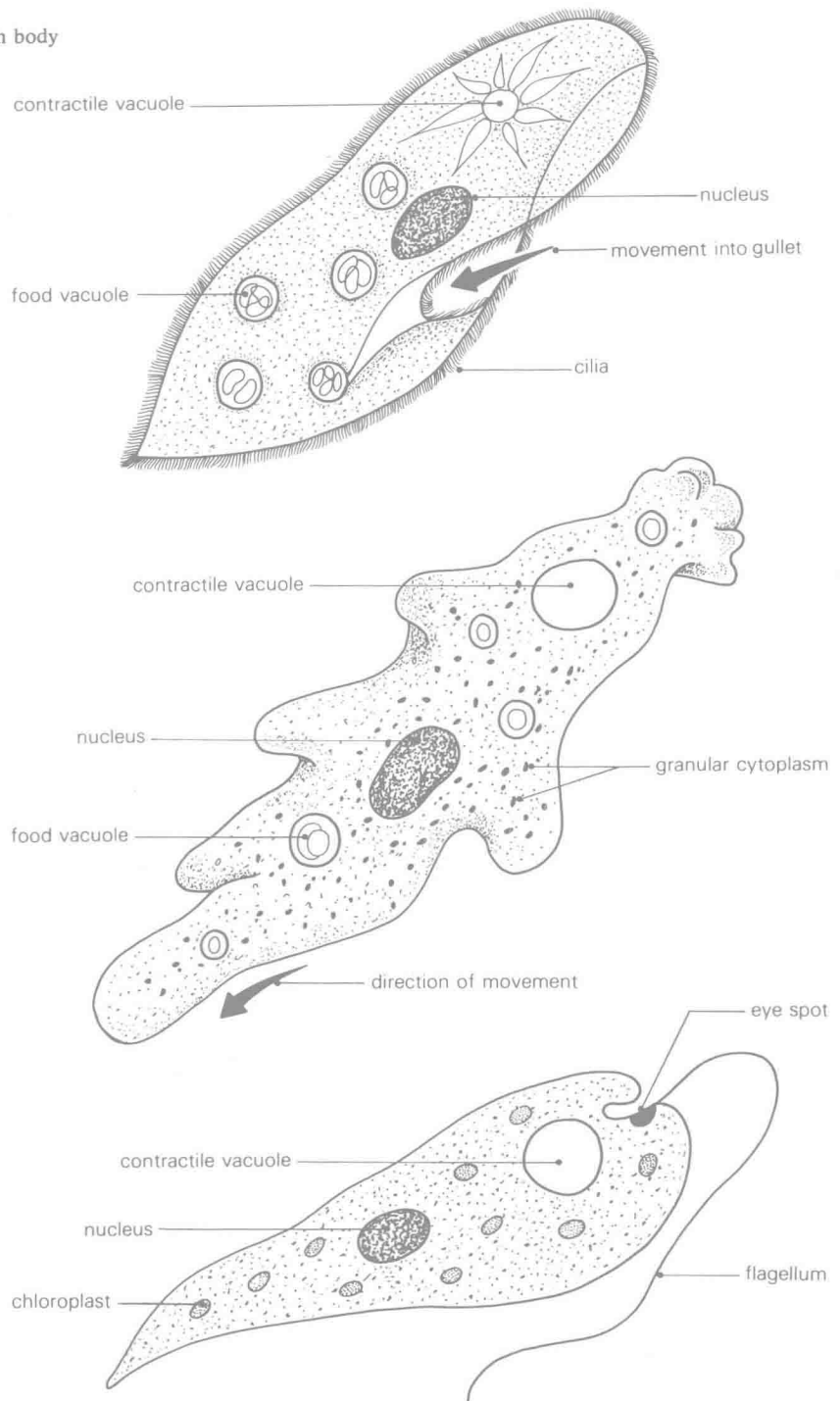


Fig 1.2 Three small water organisms, each using a different method of locomotion
(a) *Paramecium* (movement using cilia)
(b) *Amoeba* (movement using pseudopodia)
(c) *Euglena* (movement using a flagellum)

Many organisms move by means of a single, whip-like tail called a **flagellum**. As the tail lashes, the organism is propelled through the water. *Euglena* is an example of an organism that moves in this way (Fig 1.2c). Sperm cells (see Chapter 17) also move by means of a flagellum.

Reproduction

Experiment A yeast cell is placed on a cavity slide in a 0.1 per cent glucose solution at room temperature. (These cells can be handled using a very small pipette and a binocular dissecting microscope.) When the slide is examined under the dissecting microscope 24 hours later, a number of cells can be seen. The cell has multiplied. In biological terms we say that the yeast cell has reproduced.

Explanation How has this reproduction occurred? If you could observe the cells for some time under the microscope, you would see them form small side buds (Fig 1.3a). The small buds grow and then finally break off to form new individual cells. This very simple type of reproduction is known as **budding**.

Reproduction, the ability of an organism to create new organisms like itself, is a basic feature of all living things. It is not an essential part of the survival of an individual, but the survival of that species depends on at least some of the individuals of the species reproducing themselves. Reproduction by budding, which occurs in yeast cells, is one of the simplest forms of reproduction. There are several other types of reproduction.

Very simple organisms like bacteria (see Chapter 7) divide by a method known as **binary fission**. In this method, the bacterial cell grows longer, until it reaches a size at which it can divide into two portions. The nuclear (genetic) material separates into two parts, and then a new cell wall grows down the centre of the cell. Finally, the divided cell splits to form two new bacteria (Fig 1.3b).

Other one-celled animals, like the amoeba, can also reproduce by simple fission. However, the division is more complex. The process of cell division is called **mitosis**. The important feature of mitosis is that it ensures equal division of both nucleus and cytoplasm between the two 'daughter' cells (Fig 1.3c). Mitosis involves a complex sequence of events which are discussed in Chapter 5 and illustrated in Fig 5.1.

Mitosis occurs in all multicelled animals and plants. It is the process by which their cells divide. However, cell division of this type, in complex organisms, does not normally result in reproduction of a new daughter individual. Instead, cell division results in an increase in cell number and tissue volume, that is, in growth.

Reproduction by binary fission, budding and mitosis are all examples of reproduction in which the daughter organisms are identical to the parent organisms. This type of reproduction is called **asexual reproduction**. Reproduction of larger organisms such as humans involves a far more

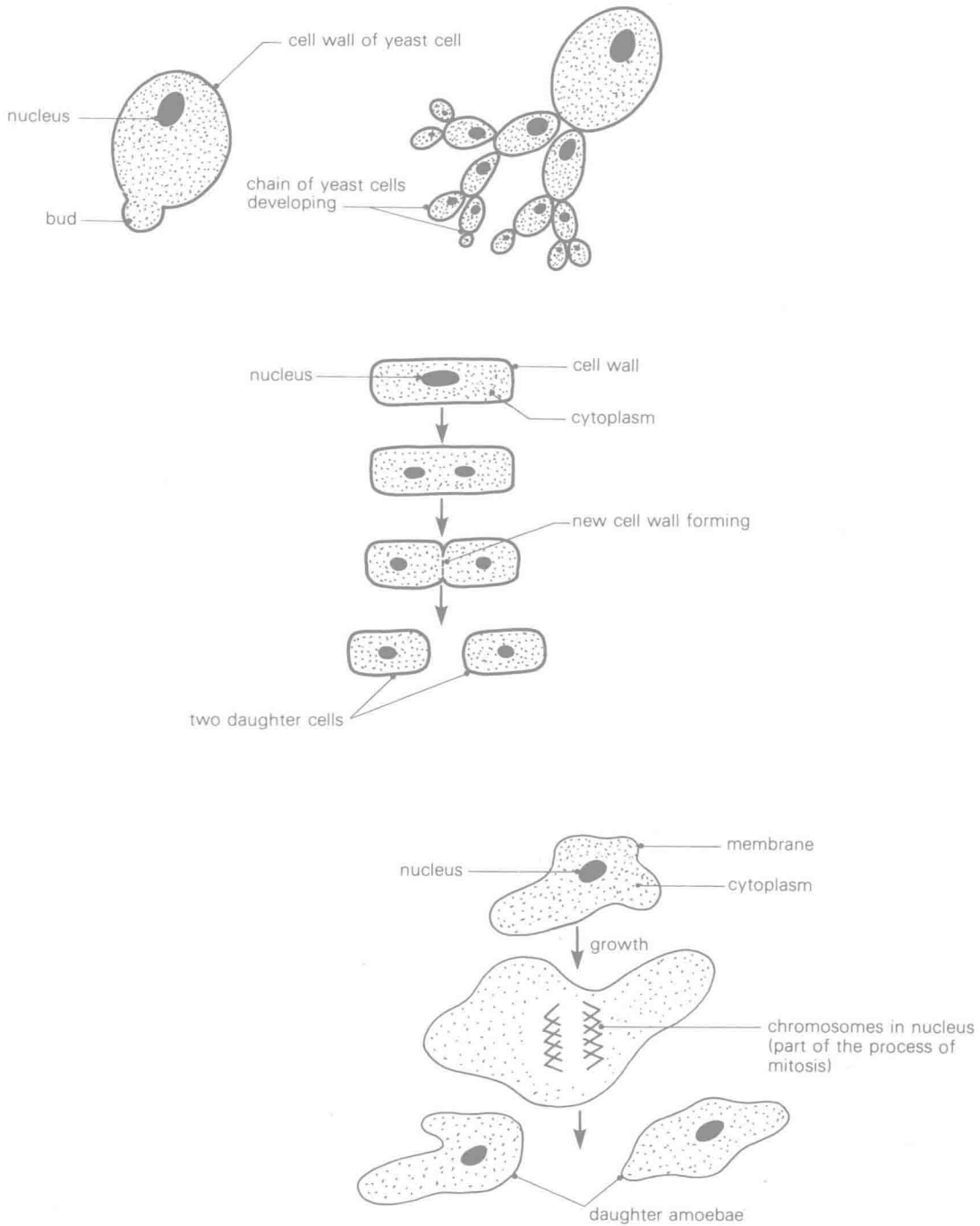


Fig 1.3 Three methods of reproduction
 (a) Budding (yeast)
 (b) Binary fission (bacteria)
 (c) Division involving mitosis (amoeba)

complex process called **sexual reproduction**. Sexual reproduction differs from asexual reproduction in several important ways:

- The formation of the new individual begins with the union (fusion) of two cells. This union is called **fertilisation**.
- The two cells which fuse to form the new individual are called **gametes**.
- In animals, the gametes are always of two kinds—male and female.

The process of reproduction of the human species is discussed in detail in Chapter 17.

Irritability

Experiment A number of euglena (single-celled animals) are placed in a drop of water on a microscope slide. Part of the slide is illuminated, the other part remains in darkness. Very soon, most of the organisms are found on the illuminated part of the slide.

Explanation The organisms have responded to a change in their environment. In biological terms this change is called a **stimulus**. Because the euglena are able to detect the stimulus and respond to it, they are said to be **irritable**.

All living things, plants included, are irritable in some way. Different organisms are sensitive (or can respond) to different types of stimuli. You may have observed how a plant bends slowly towards *light* from a window in a dark room, or how a tendril of a climbing plant curls in response to *touch*. Woodlice move away from light, and moths fly towards it. People, of course, can detect and respond to a huge variety of stimuli—they have special communication systems which enable them to do this. These are discussed in detail in Chapters 13 and 15.

Classifying the living world

The biologist classifies living organisms by grouping them according to their permanent and useful characteristics. For example, the kingdom of animals can be broken up into smaller, but still very large, groups called *phyla* (singular *phylum*), into which are placed animals with similar characteristics. The animals which make up a *phylum* can be split into a number of smaller groups called *classes*. *Classes* can in turn be subdivided into: *orders*, *families*, *genera* (singular *genus*) and finally into the smallest category, the *species*.

Every organism is given a name according to the genus and species groups it belongs to. Because organisms belonging to the same genus and species groups possess particular characteristics, knowing the genus and species name of an organism tells us a great deal about the organism.

Figure 1.4 illustrates this process of classification by showing the place of humans amongst living things.